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Uneasy alliance: women as agents of social control*

Leslie J. Miller

Abstract This paper treats the dilemma created for women by the current war on "public immorality" (e.g., the war on pornography) as an occasion to examine the role of women as agents of social control. Three related issues are considered: 1) the historical emergence of women as "guardians of manners and morality" for the society, 2) the shift in rhetoric which marks women's social control movements today, and 3) the structural factors which bolster women's ambivalence toward this role.

Résumé. Cette communication se propose d'exposer le dilemme cree chez les femmes par la guerre actuelle contre "1'immoralite publique" (par exemple la guerre contre la pornographie); ce dilemme fournit 1'occasion d'examiner le role des femmes en tant qu'agents de controle social. On a souleve alors trois points qui se rattachent a ce suject, tels que: 1) La naissance historique des femmes considerees comme "gardiennes des moeurs et de la moralite" de la societe 2) Le changement en rhetorique qui marque les mouvements de controle social des femmes aujourd'hui 3) Les facteurs structuraux qui soutiennent 1'ambivalence des femmes envers ce role.

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Introduction

This paper begins with the recognition that many women[1] experience a real ambivalence about the desirability of the current war on "public immorality." (e.g. the war on pornography) and especially about the alliance with the forces of law and order that such a campaign seems to entail. The dilemma created by the clash of repressive and emancipatory interests appears in a whole host of contemporary issues. For example, as women move to defend themselves and their children against forms of public immorality such as pornography, they find this interest to be in direct contradiction with the emancipatory desire to defend the rights of other low-status or marginal groups in the society — the mentally ill, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, and advocates of artistic and sexual freedom. Can women both "Take Back The Night" (a clear law-and-order slogan calling for safer streets) and also fight for the rights of prostitutes or bath-house sub-cultures?

I propose to take this ambivalence as the occasion to examine the changing shape of women's involvement in social control. The paper which follows treats three related issues. First, we recognize that while history, feminist and otherwise, depicts women primarily as victims of social control, it is clear that they have also participated in the victimization of others, as agents or instruments. Section I, therefore, looks at this second less visible tradition. Here I consider women's historic role as "guardians of morality" for the society, in particular as members of bourgeois reform movements which regulated marginal groups under the banner of refinement and decency. Since the informal control of others through the regulation of manners was until the eighteenth century a man's preserve, I shall be asking what becomes of the role as it is reassigned to women. Section II looks at the credibility of women's claim to legitimately voice the morality of the social whole. In Section III, I focus more directly on the problem of ambivalence per se. If it *is* the case in fact that women have played the role of social control agents — society's "moral police" — why are many women reluctant to accept this skein in their history, and why are they uncomfortable wearing this mantle today? Here I suggest several structural supports for their ambivalence.

I. Women as agents of social control

Origins of the role

The efforts of women to control the behaviour of others have long been associated with the "womanly" ideals of refinement, taste, and decency. The special role of women as "guardians of manners and morals" appears to have its historical point of origin at the moment when the emergence of the early modern family heralded the separation of life into public and private spheres. The rise of the modern state produced an analogous split in the institution of social control. In the modern world, the instrument of social control came to have two prongs: one, the shaping and

1. Women are not alone in experiencing feelings of ambivalence in these matters, especially with respect to the issue of censorship. But there exist certain features peculiar to the history of women, and to their gender socialization, which continue to make the issues more complex for them than for men. It is these *gendered* sources of ambivalence which are the subject of this paper.

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enforcement of law; the other, the shaping of morality. The first is predominantly public, formal and male; the second domestic, informal and female.

For those readers unfamiliar with the recent renaissance in the social history of the family, I sketch below the main points which are relevant to the present discussion. Though there is considerable debate as to just what changed and why (see Anderson, 1980) the most influential of the social historians, Philippe Ariès, describes the emergence of the modern family as "a revolution in sentiment." His ground-breaking book *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) deals with changes in family life from the late Middle Ages until the end of the nineteenth century and focusses mainly on France. Ariès claims that until the late 1700s the family existed as a political and public body, a lineage or "house," with little or no private character. Gradually there emerged toward the middle of the eighteenth century a recognizably modern form of family, termed "intimate" or "domestic." This newly domestic family is characterized as a little nest of natural sentiment forged as a bulwark against the impersonal public arena.

In general, the vast body of data assembled by the early writers, including Ariès, documented on the one hand the gradual decline of so-called "public immorality" — a decrease in rowdy public festivals and drunkenness,in celebratory public torture and executions, in wandering bands of youths. It found, on the other hand, a new sense of the vulnerability of the child, the spread of the "little school" and of discipline, and a changed conjugal relation marked by a new emphasis on the importance of sentiment, manners and hygiene. The outcome was a clear distinction for the first time between public and private spheres of life. With the concern for the protection of the child from the rough-and-tumble of the street, and a growing intimacy between spouses, the domestic family had seemingly emerged from a sea of brutality and had become an object of veneration.

The nature and progress of domesticity has become a topic of some disagreement. Foucault and others have described it as the process of the rationalization of emotional life. Here, domesticity is understood as the means by which the barbaric life, the Hobbesian existence regulated only by force, is curbed by control, scrutiny and reason (Foucault, 1979). Others have described it as a process of embourgeoisement, according to which the standards of the new middle class family come to be defined as the *only* standard, are given moral weight, and are imposed gradually but inexorably upon the other strata of society. Still others have interpreted this body of data as the progress of social control over the family, and in particular as the increasing propensity of the state to regulate family life (Donzelot, 1979).

However the progress of domesticity is conceptualized, two things are beyond dispute: 1) that the newly domestic family came to be closely associated with refinement — "manners and morals" — and 2) that responsibility for the informal control of others through the imposition of standards of refinement was assigned to women. Therefore, when we say that modernity produced the separation between public and private spheres of social life, we refer not just to the separation between men's paid work and women's unpaid work which feminist sociologists have emphasized, but also to the split between a man's cultural world and a women's cultural world, between men's talk and women's talk, manly demeanour and

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ladylike demeanour. And whether or not women *forged* this separation, it is evident that women came to play the major role in *policing or enforcing* it.

The eminent German scholar Norbert Elias is one of the few sociologists to pay close attention to the history of manners before the "domestic revolution" and to relate changing standards of taste and comportment to social control. It is the gradual emergence of new standards of refinement and the ever-tightening restrictions upon displays of affect which Elias calls "the civilizing process" (Elias, 1978). In a sense we can think of Elias as unfolding the origins of the "revolution in sentiment" on which Ariès focusses.

Elias's project in *The History of Manners* is to trace the link between the social graces and social control: how and why the "implements of civilization," such as the fork, the handerchief and the nightdress and their attendant "proper" forms of behaviour, made their way gradually through Europe, usually from Italy, in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With respect to the nightdress, for example, he notes that the sight of total nakedness was the everyday rule up until the sixteenth century. Sleeping had not yet been shifted behind the scenes of social life; as Ariès too notes, it was normal to receive visitors in rooms with beds, and opulent beds and bed clothes, well displayed for visitors, conferred prestige upon their owners.

Eventually, with the rise of the middle class, the unconcern with nakedness and bodily functions disappears; getting up and going to bed become "refined" or domesticated and are displaced from social life into the interior of the family. Finally, before World War I, the mere mention of sleeping and undressing are tabooed and these acts become surrounded with heavy prohibitions. Elias quotes one writer who had the freedom to complain somewhat later: "During the Genteel Era before the War, camping was the only way by which respectable writers might approach the subject of sleep. In those days ladies and gentlemen did not go to bed — they retired. How they did it was nobody's business. An author who thought differently would have found himself excluded from the circulating library." (Elias, 1978: 165).

Elias traces the changing structure of affect in the upper classes in society — the changing "shame frontier" — by examining documents such as manuals of etiquette from the Middle Ages to the 1800s. Under his analysis these documents are made to reveal not simply an evolution in taste — When do spitting and defecating in public, for example, become unmannerly? — but also an evolution in the discourse of social control itself. From the 1200s to the 1500s counsels appear in the language of straightforward instruction and demonstrate a concern for harmonious social interaction ("If you share a bed with a stranger, it is not proper to lie so near that you disturb him; let your better choose which side of the bed he lies on"), but by the late 1700s their tone has become one of moral injunction, one which controls indirectly by flagging areas of social life with euphemism or with conspicuous omission. It is the shift from a tone of care and seriousness which invites public discussion to one which suggests privacy and strict prohibition which signals the advancing frontier of shame and delicacy and the march of civility.

What is the root of these changing forms of ritual and regulation? For Elias, they

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reflect the rise of new forms of social and economic organization. The feudal environment was warlike, but it also isolated rural estates from one another; when men came together, it was often to fight (e.g. the crusades) and pertinent social distinctions, such as where one came from or whose banner one flew, were distinct, clearly understood and easily observed. With the move of the landed aristocracy away from the feudal estates and into the life around the court and into the growing cities, "old social ties were loosened or broken" and individuals of different social origins were thrown together in new ways. In consequence, there is a higher danger of social conflict and the code of behaviour becomes stricter — "the social imperative not to offend others becomes more binding" (Elias, 1978: 79-80).

As authority shifts from a dispersed feudal form to a more centralized one, then, the rituals which once served to defend life and property in the isolation of the feudal estate now serve, as Goffman would say, to "manage social interaction" in close quarters. In these closer quarters, ritual begins to reflect the social hierarchy in new ways, as specific forms of address and apparel become firmly attached to social rank. Only the nobility, for example, will be allowed to wear certain colours and fabrics. The concern to declare social rank extends to other social practices: before servants, for example, there is no need to cover one's nakedness or to hide bodily functions; because they are below you in the hierarchy, you need not worry about giving offense. At the same time, in order to minimize the possibility of conflict, displays of affect (e.g. aggressiveness) become the province of specialized groups and take on a purely ritual form, e.g. jousting, boxing as "sport," and wrestling in the highly theatrical form we still see today. Finally, says Elias, in the 1700s the rituals lose their purely social function and become internalized as psychological prohibitions which every adult observes. And the more integrated society becomes, the more these potential danger must be regulated.

Thus, for Elias, the new sensibility in manners and family life develops in tandem with the move toward an integrated social milieu and a centralized form of state authority; manners/rituals are strategies for the management of interaction and their different forms are reflective of different social contexts.[2]

The role is feminized

What groups in the society set and police the shifting standards of civility? In *The History of Manners* Elias himself pays little direct attention to gender. But by carefully inspecting his materials we can tease out the following points.

1. The concern with manners in earlier centuries is tied to courtly life, and the individuals who best exemplify and enforce the new standard of refinement are male. Thus it is the court gentlemen who are the paragons of taste and fashion — in elegant costume, in song and dance, in brilliant social repartee — and it is Castiglione (*The Courtier*) and Erasmus (*De civilitate morum puerilium*) and Caxton (*Book of Curtesye*), all men, who codify their ways.

2. This brief summary cannot do justice to the theory of cultural change set out in *The History of Manners*. Readers are encouraged to consult the original, as well as *Power and Civility*, by the same author.

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2. As the "revolution in sentiment" unfolds and the newly modern family form emerges, this role is *reassigned to women*. From the late 1700s forward the exemplars, enforcers, and codifiers are female. Mr. Manners is now Miss Manners and Erasmus has become (in this regard at least) Emily Post. Moreover, the "nursery of refined conduct" is no longer the court, as it was in Erasmus's time; that nursery is now the newly domestic family (Elias, 1978: 137). In short, both the sphere of regulation and the agents of social control have shifted.

It is worth examining in some detail the rise of the women to prominence in this newly feminized role. The most striking aspect of it is how recent it is, yet how swiftly and firmly it becomes lodged in the cultural stock of knowledge as a — perhaps *the* — defining characteristic of a "womanly nature." Before the separation of public and private spheres of life there is no real evidence to associate *women* with refinement and sensitivity; in fact, we can safely infer from Elias's account that women would not have been viewed as credible arbiters of "*courtoisie*" and "*civilité*" before this great shift occurs. Shortly after the role is reassigned to women it is reformulated as natural — the sign of its cultural centrality — and eventually invoked in order to rationalize the political division of social life, i.e. to affirm the rightness of women's participation in the home and their exclusion from the public realm, notably business, politics and war.

This leads directly to a second point: as men relinquish the role of guardian of manners and morals, the role suffers a loss in status.[3] We can picture the decline as a demotion of this form of social control from the high-power institution of the courtly circle to the less powerful sphere of the newly formed domestic or bourgeois family. It is one of the curiosities of social history that the domestic family form upon its emergence is at once so venerated and yet so discrediting to all of the activities which fall within its domain. The prestige of the role under discussion is no exception: as it is feminized and reassigned to the private sphere it is accordingly trivialized. And it is just at this point in history that the cultural capital it possesses — the knowledge of correct deportment and the authority to enforce the latter — suffers a real loss in value.

The contemporary reader, long accustomed to assuming the low value of this form of social control, will have difficulty in appreciating the power of the role in the pre-modern world. Today "mere" mannerliness is seen as the province of women, girls, and little boys, and as such is thought to have little to do with the important activities of the public sphere. It is sometimes even portrayed as an obstacle to those who must make the transition to the (paid) workworld; thus "Miss Manners" reminds us that niceness or politeness properly belong in the home and are positive hindrances in the office ("Miss Manners," 1984: 50-3) and some scholars define the jettisoning of these polluting rituals as a necessary rite of passage in a boy's transition to manhood (in MacKie, 1983: 114-15; 154-56). These illustrations remind us that in the contemporary world, the possession of delicacy

3. See Lipman-Blumen (1984) for an account of the decline in status of certain occupational roles (e.g. secretary) as they were redefined as "women's work." For another example see "How the 'gossip' became a woman" by Alexander Rysman (1977).

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and refinement is understood as a detriment, not an increment, to one's power and prestige,[4] based on the intimate association of these qualities with the discrediting sphere of women and the home.

Before the rise of the modern state, however, the power of the prince in his court and the need for *civilité* on the part of the nobles there were intimately interwoven: power was embodied and articulated in manners. In this milieu manners are the rituals through which the raw relations of super- and subordination are made livable. Their value as an accountrement of power is reflected in the fact of their inclusion as an essential component of a gentleman's education and in the prestige accorded to the authors of manuals of etiquette, always men of respectable social class.[5]

The emergence of the modern state appears to signal the declining importance of this form of social control. From the perspective of the history of regulation, one facet of the rise of the state is the bifurcation of the institution of social control into the two prongs mentioned earlier: one, the shaping and enforcement of law; the other, the shaping and enforcement of morality and taste.

This is a gendered division of labour. As the first prong gains in prestige and is stamped as a man's domain, the second is relinquished, sloughed off to women and the private sphere. We still tend to regard this division as "natural" today.

In the foregoing I have tried to sketch the place and power of the guardian of manners and morals before this split occurred — before men relinguished it and moved to consolidate their "real" power in the realm of formal or codified law. From this perspective the decline of manners as a form of social control (and the role of "guardian") is a small vignette in the larger story of the emergence and discrediting of the private or domestic sphere.

Some important points follow from this brief account. First and most obvious is the recognition that the concern for refinement and delicacy does not originate with women, as we so often assume. It began as a prestigious male role some centuries prior to the emergence of the domestic family, and was feminized — installed as the centrepiece in the cult of "true womanhood" — much later.

Second, those among us today who regard the arbiter of manners and morals as having no "real" (i.e., no formal or legal) power appear to have accepted and internalized the relatively recent androcentric picture of social life which denies real status to most domestic activities (notably housework). Despite this androcentric view, it is clear that women as arbiters and exemplars of manners have been engaged in an important and legitimate form of social control, just as they have been engaged in legitimate teaching (child-rearing) and legitimate, albeit unpaid, work. I mean to say here that women have, and have had, power, despite the social invisibility conferred upon these activities by that androcentric depiction. This is so, quite apart from whether we today approve or deplore the content of the standards of refinement

4. Compare Lipman-Blumen's description of micromanipulative techniques of power (1984: Chapter 4).

5. Women figure in this period only as the occasional objects of *courtois* precepts (and then only "ladies"). A feudal "motto for men" advises: If a lady asks you to sit beside her, do not sit on her dress or too near her, and if you wish to speak softly to her, never clutch her with your arms, whatever you have to say. (Elias, 1982: 90).

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and civility which women have enforced. The effort to restore visibility and credibility to women as agents of (informal) social control is directly analogous to the effort to restore visibility to house- and reproductive work as "real" work. From this perspective women who deny that other women have been or are presently acting as social control agents — in the family, or in the street — make the same claim as those who deny housework the status of real work. Both claims attest only to the veil which conventional history has dropped, until recently, over domestic life.

A third implication of this historical discussion concerns the credibility of the role since its "fall" into the domestic sphere. Having grasped the process of trivialization which accompanied the reassignment of this role to women, we are better able to understand the lack of credibility which the civilizing interest encountered when women first attempted to extend it from the household[6] into the street.

The attempt to civilize the street begins in the eighteenth century and builds into the characteristic project of the nineteenth century. Not long after the emergence of the "cult of domesticity" in the private sphere we see the redefinition of the public sphere — the street and the stranger — as corrupting influences which now must be cleaned up and refined. These new views are reflected in the appearance of fledgling organizations specifically geared to purifying or "civilizing" the street — to reducing the incidence of "public immorality" (drunkenness, brawling, "licentiousness," "indecency") and of religious festivals and spectacles which were thought to be the breeding ground of the former (Ariès, 1962).

Insofar as these campaigns were seen as "women's movements" and "women's issues," they suffered a credibility problem. Civilizing the streets was regarded in the same light as the ladylike concern to civilize the home and the child — laudable enough in its proper place, but not to be confused with issues of real public consequence. This legacy of trivialization continues to affect the perception of women's issues and projects of all sorts. Because of it, women's groups would eventually resort to borrowing credibility from the major privileged discourse of the modern era — scientific expertise. I shall return to this point later in the paper.

Despite efforts to trivialize the guardian of manners and morals, the movements which sprang up in the nineteenth century to clean up the streets achieved a certain impact. The history of such movements forms a long but direct line from groups like the Society for the Formation of Manners in the 1700s which targeted homosexuals (Knox, 1985:6), to the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents in the early 1800s (Finkelstein, 1985:119), to the Prohibition movement of the early 1900s, to the recent campaigns to "Take Back the Night."

These movements sometimes included men, but were spearheaded by women, marched under the women's banner of bourgeois refinement, and, indeed, proved to be a useful early springboard for women into a place of some influence in the

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6. See Donzelot (1979) for an account of the campaign to civilize the household by improving its moral and physical hygiene, especially by cracking down on slovenly or licentious servants, and by curtailing the previously widespread habit of "putting out" children to live with peasant wetnurses.

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public sphere.[7] But however much these movements gave women a voice outside the household, we must recognize that they helped to legitimate the rise of the great nineteenth-century bureaucratic institutions of social control — the prison, the workhouse, the asylum, the police and the army.

Whether there was, in fact, an objectively measurable increase in the level of street violence after the late eighteenth century is a question beyond the scope of this paper.[8] What can be demonstrated conclusively, however, is the spread of the new sensibility, the concern for manners and morals against which the unruly tone of street life now offended. This standard is ever more broadly disseminated, and the agents of dissemination are women.

The alleged corrupting influence of the workplace, of streets and fields, and of the informal sociability of strangers (ethnic and class "undesirables") finally crystallized out as the characteristic social problem of the early modern era. The effort to re-form the public sphere in the image of a war on street violence and vice was launched by early women's groups referred to as "purity coalitions" by social historians like Barbara Finkelsten (1985) and Ronald Cohen (1985). This war is carried forward today in largely woman-sponsored programs such as the war on pornography, the campaign to "Take Back the Night," and even those like Block Parent and Neighborhood Watch, which might be accused of confusing the best community with the most highly controlled one.[9]

Of course, the early participation of women in the public sphere was not limited to social control; women also led or threw their support behind emancipatory movements. In the service of causes like abolition, civil rights, and disarmament "women struggled against injustice to others, then to themselves" (Lipman - Blumen, 1984: 40). My interest here is not to deny this skein in the tradition. Rather, I want to point out the tension between these two contradictory interests — one repressive, one emancipatory — and to note that conventional readings of history emphasize the second at the expense of the first. That is, received versions of history (including recent feminist versions) identify women largely as the underdog — either as the dog itself, or as the spokesperson for other underdog groups. My immediate purpose here is to restore visibility to the role of women as agents, not victims, of social control. In any debate over the question "Which side are we on?" women must recognize that they have in fact been on both sides — controlling and controlled — for some time now. The tension feminists feel today between the

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7. While I note with interest the theses of scholars like Donzelot (1979) and Lasch (1977) which depict women solely as the dupes of male professional expertise of various stripes, I reject the curtailed conception of moral agency and responsibility which these authors attribute to women. For an interesting discussion of the shrinking conception of human agency, see Derek L. Phillips (1985).
8. I have treated this issue separately in my unpublished paper "Social rhetoric as social fact: The rhetoric of domesticity and the externalization of domestic violence."
9. In his recent book *Visions of Social Control* Stanley Cohen criticizes neighborhood crime-control programs such as "Block Mothers" and "Helping Hands to Children" on the grounds that these ".fit the dominant mood [which sanctifies] professionalism, anti-utopianism, realistic utilitarianism, cost benefit analysis, [and] planning for the purified city" (Cohen, 1985: 265).

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forces of emancipation and repression is not new. It is real and it has a considerable — though sometimes shadowy — tradition behind it.

If women and men today are to evaluate recent movements such as the anti-pornography one, they must be prepared to recognize straightforwardly that such movements are the offspring of the early repressive purity coalitions. This is so, no matter how unrefined or crude such an assertion sounds in the contemporary ear. The androcentric attempt to trivialize the "feminine" concern for refinement and decency must not cloud over our view of the sometimes repressive goals and social consequences of these early campaigns. As offspring of this tradition, recent programs are left open to the same charge which has been levelled at those early movements, i.e., that they have given women a voice in the community, but a voice which has often recommended the increased socal control of other low-power groups of flotsam and jetsam in the society. A firmer grasp on the history of women's double-sided involvement in the institution of social control will help to transform private doubts about such campaigns into public issues.

II. From disreputable to dangerous: The changing rationale for social control

It might be objected that the kinds of campaigns mentioned in this paper (Take Back The Night, the war on pornography) are concerned not with refinement and manners but with real issues of violence and safety. This observation points up the fact that women's involvement in social control has not remained static since the rise of the domestic family.

Targets of social control campaigns have changed, as I shall show, but more importantly the *rationale for intervention* — how women understand and justify their efforts to regulate the behavior of others — has shifted. Women now ground programs of intervention in an instrumental claim ("Do not do X because it causes harm to others") rather than a moral one ("Do not do X because it is wrong").

The recent anti-pornography campaign is a case in point. Those who would control pornography now generally argue that it should be excluded not for its offensiveness per se but for the "third person harm" it causes (i.e. the dangerous effect it has on behaviour). The slogan "pornography is the theory; rape is the practice" says, in effect, that pornography must be controlled not (only) for the harm it does to our sense of decency, but for the eventual harm it does to our persons. This claim attempts to persuade society that pornography is *not* a victimless crime, as it might first appear, but rather leads to "third person harm." In hitching theory to practice, the anti-pornography movement hopes to achieve a redefinition of pornography from the "merely" morally disreputable to the dangerous. In so doing,the movement tacitly recognizes that any program which recommends the repression of the merely disreputable or offensive will find little support among liberals in the society.

By choosing to regard contemporary movements such as the war on pornography and Take Back the Night as guided by the concern for personal safety and not public morality, women are saying that they have lost, or wish to abandon, the high moral ground and their "traditional" role as the voice of moral rectitude. The shift away from a morality-based rationale for social control is conventionally described

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in ungendered political terms as the move from conservative to liberal positions (*Pornography and Prostitution in Canada,* 1985: Chapter 2). But it has special implications for women and it is these I want to touch on below.

The early modern era, especially the last half of the nineteenth century, was the heyday of the woman as the specifically *moral* guardian of society. Before this time — before the emergence of a genuine ethos of domesticity — the regulation of manners, still a man's role, had not yet taken on a genuinely moral tone. Looking again at the counsels of Erasmus, Caxton, Castiglione and the others, we can see that manners are deemed to be socially and politically necessary for those in or aspiring to elite circles. "Do not put your hand in the bowl for you will offend your betters" — here the tone is one of social rather than moral injunction. The importance of manners to social rather than moral standing in the premodern era is evidenced by the recognition, earlier noted, that there were some groups before whom *courtoisie* was unnecessary. In these manuals the arbiter speaks to a particular segment of society and makes no claim, yet, to voice (or to know) what is for the moral good of all.

The new and striking tone of specifically *moral* injunction whose emergence Elias so carefully traces — "If you are forced to share a bed ... you should maintain a strict and vigilant modesty" — is a much more recent phenomenon. It and the role of the moral guardian arise in conjunction with the "new sensibility" attendant on the separation of public and private life, and especially the veneration of the latter as the "cult of domesticity." In short, it comes about as the role is feminized.

An important aspect of the veneration of domesticity is the cultural depiction of woman as endowed by nature with a special moral sense. The special moral sense was an important facet of what has been called the "cult of true domestic womanhood" (see Anderson, 1980: 47). Such a view of women, though it served to exclude them from most public-sphere involvement, at the same time gave their voices a *distinctive* authority, so that when they moved to regulate manners (conduct, deportment) in the home, and later in the street, they were seen to be voicing the morality of the whole society, rather than merely defending the prudish interests of one of its parts. It is from just this period, when women's participation in campaigns to regulate licentious or "indecent" conduct lent those campaigns a *moral* weight, that we learned to say "manners and morals" in the same breath.

The targets of women's morality campaigns changed considerably from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, but the tone of moral injunction was not relinquished. The earliest targets seem to have been the public tortures and executions which comprised the entertainments of the ordinary citizen in past centuries — think of *A Tale of Two Cities* here — as well as ancient popular ceremonies like the cat-burnings with which townspeople celebrated the arrival of important visitors (Elias, 1978: 203-5; Darnton, 1985). Later targets were those which transgressed what Elias called the "shame frontier": drunken licentiousness, exhibitionism or "lewdness," homosexuality. Though these targets shifted as the "march of civility" progressed, at any given point a particular act was presented as offending against the sensibilities of all, i.e., as threatening the morality of the whole and not simply the safety of some. Even when women chose to articulate the moral

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cry through the image of the innocent child, that child was viewed not as a member of a group whose bodily safety and rights had to be protected, but rather as the symbol of the endangered moral health of the whole.

The extremes of prudishness which mark late nineteenth century women's morality campaigns ("purity" campaigns) as they vigilantly policed the shame frontier tends today to obscure the fact that women's specifically moral authority was then at its highest. For it was out of the special moral sense with which the era endowed them *as women* that women's groups were able to engage in social control campaigns with any credibility at all, whether the policing of "indecent" behaviour, or the championing of the oppressed.

One sign of this authority can be found in the fact that early (male) professional groups, notably medical doctors, sought out alliances with women in order to give programs of state intervention (e.g. early social welfare programs) an air of moral sanctity, without which they were deemed likely to fail (Donzelot, 1979). In short, in the era when women were still able to command the high moral ground, professional expertise needed *them* to bolster *its* credibility, a situation conspicuously reversed today.

The decline of a morality-based rationale for social intervention has proceeded apace through the twentieth century. With some exceptions (Gilligan, 1982; O'Brien, 1981) women no longer claim to have, nor are customarily regarded as having, a distinctive moral sense — not a special ear for what is right, nor the special authority to give voice to the morality of the whole.[10] If we pause to consider the implications of this shift, we begin to see that relinquishing (or losing) the moral claim is not without its costs.

First, the issue of *credibility* will be affected. For the most part, a morality based program of intervention rests its credibility on the (supposedly) self-evident credibility of its authors or proponents i.e. on the readiness of the society to accept them as the legitimate voice of the whole. Thus, when nineteenth-century women drew themselves up to their full moral stature and inveighed mightily against the evils of drink, or of war, or poverty, claiming that the mere presence of these excrescences was an offence, we either accepted this claim or rejected it; we did not ask for proof. Then, "respectable" women were thought to speak for morality as priests spoke for God, and to have to offer proof was already to have lost the battle. In short, the credibility of the morality-based claim is *intrinsic*. Its form is: "This act must be forbidden because it is (i.e. we know it to be) evil."

By contrast, the claim which is based on an instrumental concern for personal safety is forced to rely on *extrinsic* authority for its credibility. The recent war on pornography, for example, depends (unlike the morality-based claim) on empirical support for the link between pornography and sexual assault to secure its legitimacy.

10. This shift is broadly related to the emergence of the liberal state, in which the social whole becomes reformulated as a coalition of private interests (i.e. particular groups endowed with *rights*). The mark of the modern state is its desire to grant visibility (i.e. citizens rights) to all previously invisible groups. For present purposes I am concerned not with the causes but rather the consequences of this reformulation. Here, it means that no one group will be seen to speak for the whole, but instead for its own particular rights or interests.

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Only by establishing "third person harm" can pornography be made a justifiable target for regulation. And on the matter of the link between pornography and assault the evidence continues to pour in, but we face at this time a very mixed bag of findings (*Pornography and Prostitution in Canada,* 1985:99).

Once women relinquish a morality-based claim, then, they are faced with the rhetorical necessity of asserting[11] — if not proving — such a linkage if a campaign of social control is to be credible to a liberal audience (here, an audience which no longer ascribes to them, or to any other group, a special capacity to transcend their particular interests and speak with moral authority for the whole).

In practical terms, this rhetorical necessity means that every campaign must assert the existence of a *victim* to whom harm is done. Thus, for example, it must be claimed that racist novels, violent fairy tales, lesbianism, exhibitionism and sexist language are not just offensive, as was once supposed; on the contrary, "studies have shown" that reading Huck Finn will lead to racist attacks, that Little Red Riding Hood will make children violent, that sexist language results in real inequality in the workplace, or assaults on women, and so forth. Each previously victimless act will be endowed with its victim; this will be the rhetorical strategy for turning morally offensive or indecent acts into dangerous ones that cry out for repressive intervention.[12]

I do not wish to suggest here that women have frivolously abandoned a morality-based rationale, nor that they could easily have done otherwise. The two conditions which render moral crusades credible — 1) the existence in the

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11. It is important to recognize that this rhetorical form is *necessary but not sufficient* for an effective social control crusade in a liberal social environment. Other more external features will affect the capacity of a group to successfully exert its influence (e.g. in law). For a discussion of these features see, for example, Douglas (1984) and Pfohl (1984).

12. The rhetoric involved in the shaping of manners shows a similar drift. With respect to the use of the fork, for example, manuals throughout the nineteenth century answered the question "Why must I not eat with my hands?" with "Because it is 'cannibal'" — meaning (according to Elias) "it is self-evidently cannibal, barbaric, uncivilized, or whatever else it is called." Later this gives way to an instrumentally-based rhetoric: "Why must I eat with a fork?" is now answered "Because it is unhygienic to eat with one's fingers." Elias notes that "to our sensibility it is unhygienic if different people put their fingers into the same dish, because there is danger of contracting disease." (Elias, 1978: 126) Like the other examples listed, this effort at regulating too must assert a link between the reprehensible act (eating with fingers) and the allegedly dangerous consequence (spreading disease to another), and the once "merely uncivilized" act must now be endowed with its victim (the recipient of "germs").

    It is worth noticing that this is for Elias merely a shift in rhetorical style. In his view, the suppression of eating by hand "... has very little to do with the danger of illness, the so-called 'rational' explanation," and "the first authority in our decision between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' behavior at table is feeling of distaste" (Elias, 1978: 126-7). For this author, then, the cultural frontiers of distaste are always foremost in the attempt to repress or control undesirable behavior (whether "boorish" table manners, street prostitution or obscenity); regulation may be *justified rhetorically* by recourse to the instrumental rationale of "third person harm," but "'rational understanding' is *not* the motor of the 'civilizing' of eating or any other behavior" (Elias: 116; emphasis added).

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society of a shared standard, a *moral consensus* against which a given act can be seen to offend and 2) a *cultural consensus* which endows a particular group in the society (here, women) with the "natural" ability to discern and voice that standard — appear to be lacking today.

The first condition is undermined by secularism and pluralism. The second (the cultural readiness to see women as moral guardians) was bound into the nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood," and seems to have been a trade-off in return for women's exclusion from full public-sphere participation. Clearly, as this view of femininity is rejected, and as women press their claim as a special interest group with a particular set of rights, their credibility as the voice of the whole is jeopardized.[13] Feminism is nothing if it is not this very claim.

Like other groups wishing to be heard, women have responded to these broad socio-cultural changes by changing the rhetorical structure of their social control campaigns (the way they must be framed to be heard as credible). But as those campaigns evolve from morality-based to instrumental, whatever distinctive power might have accrued to women's voices based on their "specificity" or special moral authority must be foregone.[14] As women relinquish that claim, they become just another special interest group clamoring for the public ear by leaning on the authority of science.

III. The structure of ambivalence

So far I have examined the traditional role of women as agents of social control and considered the erosion of the allegedly natural moral authority which once grounded their campaigns to "refine" behaviour in the home and on the street. Yet despite the abundant evidence of women's considerable involvement in social life in this capacity, there are many who flinch at its mention, and others who would deny it outright. This reaction is not tied strictly to particular campaigns and targets (e.g. pornography) but to the *idea* of social control more generally. I now want to ask: regardless of the target, why are women ambivalent about participating in social control campaigns at all? Why is the alliance between women and social control *itself* an uneasy one?

We can begin by recognizing that ambivalence, especially if it is widespread, is better regarded as structurally rather than psychologically created. At the individual level, women may feel that the policing of others is offensive, immoral,

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13. Edwin Schur notes another hazard associated with a morality-based claim in a milieu which regards these with suspicion. Of the feminist demand that society find the pornographic abuse of women immoral as well as illegal he observes: "This is a perfectly legitimate [demand] — although it should be noted that similar moralistic reasoning may lead to policy recommendations feminists would not find acceptable, on such 'victimless crime' issues as abortion and lesbianism" (Schur, 1984: 185).
14. For a discussion of some recent attempts to revive the issue of a special women's morality — a special sense not grounded in the misogyny of early modern domesticity arguments — see Heather-Jon Maroney (1985). In this connection I would raise the question whether *any* morality-based claim will be heard as credible in a liberal milieu, i.e., one which reduces the concept of the public good to a balanced assemblage of special (or private) interests.

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uncivilized — in a sense, not nice. But from a structural perspective, women's ambivalence toward the social control role can be seen to stem, in part, from a shared belief that such a role is a culturally inappropriate one for women to play.

Our cultural heritage prescribes clear gender norms which govern, among other things, appropriate and inappropriate ways of exercising influence in the community. Women who feel ambivalence, I suggest, are responding to a recognition that they have violated the gender norm which says that women should exercise influence in indirect persuasive ways rather than in direct or coercive ones. This norm is itself a legacy of "sweet domesticity," and though it is weakening, its effects persist in subtle forms, and encourage women to exclude themselves from direct regulatory (i.e. "masculine") intervention in the public sphere.

In addition, the strongly militaristic language in which the exercise of influence is couched — a language I have consciously employed throughout the paper — is calculated to heighten that reluctance. The whole militaristic grammar — of "wars," "campaigns," "banners," "victims," and "policing" — represents the capture (to continue in the same vein) of a potent traditional male metaphor, and for that reason alone is bound to sound provocative to men and offensive to at least some women. Lipman-Blumen has remarked that "at times, domains previously under the exclusive control of one group have become the object of another's poaching" (1984: 38). The domains she is referring to are domains in the labour force. We can extend her insight by recognizing that linguistic domains are important symbolic sites of power struggles: metaphors, like occupations, can be poached, defended, surrendered. This metaphor, so long associated with a male preserve, carries the emotional and political force of a "Keep Out" sign, one which women recognize and document by the displays of reluctance and uncertainty which identify intruders and interlopers.

There is yet a third factor which weakens women's willingness to ally themselves with the social control role. In his book *Labelling Women Deviant* Edwin Schur observes that deviance, as well as conformity, is a gendered phenomenon. Schur states:

> Among the various "standard" norm violations — that is, violations of widely agreed-upon norms which in theory apply to men and women — some more than others are treated as being "appropriate offenses" for females. These perceptions tend to reflect stereotypical assumptions regarding women's "nature" (Schur, 1984: 65)

Schur goes on to say that "passive" or "submissive" offenses are thought of as being "appropriately female." In the context of the present discussion Schur's insight means that the role of *victim*, not *victimizer* is the culturally appropriate deviant role for women.

Such gendered norms are likely to affect the kinds of constructions or interpretations women place on their own involvement in social life. With respect to past activities, it can readily be demonstrated that the image of woman as victim is the favoured historical one — the victimizer role being relatively less visible (because less appropriate). From the standpoint of cultural norms, then, this means that if women (women's groups) are going to be deviant, better they be deviant victims

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(i.e. displaying an excess of powerlessness) than deviant police (displaying an excessive abuse of power). Put briefly, women are culturally more acceptable, to themselves and to others, when they portray themselves as punching bags and doormats than as tyrants.[15]

Together, these considerations help to explain why it is that women find it easier (i.e. more appropriate) to see themselves as allied with society's powerless underdogs than with society's power-brokers, regardless of the real nature of their involvement. They will find it easier, for example to see abortion as "about" the freeing of women rather than the repression of the unborn child, or pornography as "about" the increased rights of the child rather than the lost rights of the pedophile or the artist. What is at issue, therefore, is not the event per se, but the normatively structured *interpretation* of it — and, indeed, the cultural and political acceptablility of some interpretations over others.

The point of our brief historical exploration is to point out the fact that women have had their share over the past two centuries in the policing of others. But women remain reluctant to accept this and continue to cast about for ways to couch the act of regulation so that it will sit more comfortably with traditional gender roles. The time may well have come for women to throw this burdensome interpretive task overboard. Once the discrediting grammar of militarism and coercion is stripped away, social control appears simply as one facet of the exercise of influence in the public sphere and there is no good reason for women to want to limit their voice in that sphere to fighting for the rights of the underdog. Authority always has two faces; it is the nurturing of some interests and the suppressing of others. A full participation in the public sphere will always entail controlling (limiting, curtailing) someone's rights. The real challenge for women is in the end the same as for others: how to preserve the distinction between a *principled* influence in the community and the *gratuitous* exercise of social control. Once women have faced up to the fact that they have been regulating others for some time now, it will become clearer that the real issue is not "Why regulation?" but "Regulation for *what?*"

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15. See, for example, much of the research cited by Ann Duffy (1986) which characterizes women as "uniformly powerless." Referring even to feminist scholarship, Duffy observes: "In this uncomplicated social universe there seem to be only powerful men oppressing powerless women" (Duffy, 1986:32).

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